

The Ten Commandments

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

If one had to suggest one indisputable contribution that Jews have made to humanity it might be the Bible. The trouble with that assertion is that there are sections of the Bible that are taken by some rather negatively, whether they are laws to do with slavery or even sacrifices or historical commandments like obliterating Canaanites. But I think even an atheist would agree that the Ten Commandments have not ever been bettered as a basic code of human behavior. Of course, he or she might cavil at references to God and idolatry, but be comforted by the curious yet significant fact that the Ten Commandments do not actually, in their literal wording, command you to believe in God.

These Ten appear all over the world in sculpture, art, and indeed in or around many American law courts. Yet the fact is there is no such thing as "The Ten Commandments". The exact number of commands listed under Chapter 20 of Exodus, verses 2 to 14, is a matter of dispute amongst even the greatest of Jewish authorities. If you look at the great medieval commentators, you will find numbers of specific commands derived from these verses, ranging from 12 to 15. Besides the divisions into chapter and verse we all use nowadays is a very late arrival on the scene and owes more to Christianity than to Judaism.

In fact the Jewish tradition refers to them as Aseret Hadibrot, which literally means "The Ten Statements" which really means the "Ten Principles". The fact is that if they were commandments they would be rather vague and even unhelpful. When the text says "Thou Shalt Not Kill", does it mean "kill"? If so, why does the Bible elsewhere tell us that we should kill, either Canaanites or others who come to attack us? Cannot it make up its mind? And if the text requires us to replace "kill" with "murder" then why is there no distinction stipulated between culpable homicide and manslaughter? The Bible itself makes this distinction when it talks about cities of refuge for accidental homicide. And does "Thou Shalt Not Commit Adultery" literally only mean adultery? What about all other forbidden relations such as incest? Are they included too or not? The other Biblical term we use to refer to forbidden sexual relations, "Gilui Ayarot", would be much more appropriate, if less catchy and concise. And is coveting one's neighbor's ox a separate command from coveting one's neighbor's ass or his wife? Or do they all come under the same rubric?

To make life even more complicated, there are two versions in the Bible of the same "Ten". One we have mentioned comes in Exodus 20:2-14, and then another version appears in Chapter 5 of Deuteronomy, verses 6-18. Why do they have different verse counts? Which version are we to take as the actual "Ten", given the differences? There are only minor differences in text and law, but they can be quite significant, such as in the reasons given for keeping Shabbat. The first reason given is "creation" and the second is "slavery". It's all well and good to say that both versions were given by the

Almighty simultaneously to Moses, but we ordinary mortals of lesser inspiration and indirect contact can only take in one version at a time. If a simple command like keeping the Shabbat is meant to be legislatively watertight, and all the great monotheistic religions agree in principle, then how come Jews keep it on Saturday, Christians on Sunday, and Muslims on Friday? And that's without even going into the issue of how you define "work". So what this all means is that even Biblical texts are read and understood through the varying filters of different religious experiences, traditions, and dogma.

Within Judaism itself the relationship with the "Ten" has been a rocky one. According to tradition, the Two Tablets of the Covenant which Moses brought down off the mountain, both the second whole set and the original broken bits, were kept in the Ark in the Holy of Holies in the First Temple and, were read regularly in the Temple. They were not read in synagogues every day because, as the Jerusalem Talmud, the Yerushalmi says, otherwise people might think these ten were more important than the rest of the Torah. Which, of course, is why Judaism has always referred to them as the "Aseret Hadibrot," statements, rather than commands. Nevertheless, this tendency to think they are the essential rules and all the others are secondary is precisely what has happened in many circles both within Judaism and without.

Despite all these points, the "Ten" have not been improved upon over the thousands of years since we introduced them to the world. As, indeed, we did with the Biblical command in Leviticus to "Love Your Neighbor as Yourself". I'm still always amazed to discover that so many think that came from Christianity first. But it's a sad fact that younger and seemingly prettier seductresses have touted the Ten as their own, and our enemies only seem to want to focus on those things we do that they disapprove of. So perhaps we should remind them that without us there wouldn't be any Ten Whatever-You-Want-To-Call-Them. And, yes, I'm proud of that!! In this day of newer models being assumed to be superior, I declare for the "Golden Oldie".